

WASHINGTON FARMWORKERS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

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**ROSALINDA GUILLEN OF UNITED FARM WORKERS WASHINGTON, COMMUNITY TO
COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT**

INTERVIEWEE: ROSALINDA GUILLEN

INTERVIEWERS: DAVID BACON

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DAVID 00:00:00

I want to start by getting you to talk about the history of your own family. So tell me: They worked as farmworkers. Did they ever own land? Tell me about them. Who was your dad? Your mom?

ROSALINDA 00:00:33

It was very complicated. My dad is basically-- my dad was a Tarascan indigenous person from Zacapu, Michoacán [Mexico], who-- the Guillens from Zacapu, Michoacán, were farmworkers who work their -- you know, they were like ejido¹ type of farmers and farmworkers. Yeah. And it appears from listening to my father's stories that they were always in leadership. And so my father's father, my grandfather Lorenzo Guillen-- No, no, my father's father was part Irish. His mother was half Irish, and half indigenous. So, my grandfather, I have a

¹ Ejidos are communally held agricultural lands in Mexico, following the traditional indigenous system of communal landholding. Ejidos were created as part of a land reform effort by the Mexican government to appease peasant uprisings in the aftermath of the Mexican Revolution. Agrarian reform and the process of awarding ejidos officially ended in Mexico in 1991 in anticipation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA).

photo of him. He was beautiful, but he ended up being like a forest ranger type of person in Mexico in his community there and municipality. He was in charge of protecting the forests. So he worked the land but also he was in charge of protecting the forest and of course, a lot of the indigenous people were cutting wood in the forest to sell to use for themselves, and it was my father's job to try and stop that. They were not happy with that. When my father was eight years old, several of the men in the village killed my grandfather in front of my father. They killed him with machetes and stopped the forest work there, because they needed the wood. So that had a huge impact on my father and his mother -- he was living-- the family was living in Zacapu and his mother was Texan. So she came from a landowning family in Texas, not by any means big, hacendados,² but I think they were at one point. But after the Mexican-American War, they lost their land and they ended up with just a very small piece of land that they grew cotton in. But still, they had land, they had their own land. And she was from Texas, which in Mexico at the time, which was like what-- in the 1920's? Mexicans from the United States were considered gringos [foreigners]. So my grandmother could not speak Spanish. And she was in this indigenous village in Zacapu, Michoacán, a very unpopular woman.

DAVID 00:03:19

Did they speak Purépecha in that village?

ROSALINDA 00:03:21

Yes. They did. They spoke Purépecha and Spanish and she could speak neither. She-- they also saw her as a very, I guess, upper class person and I have photos of my grandmother and she was. She was a very elegant woman. She didn't act elegantly. She looks very humble and like a peaceful, calm woman. But they didn't like her because she was a gringa. And she, of course, she was with my father and there was a lot of jealousy among the women that he had gone and married a gringa, and so when my grandfather was killed, it became very difficult for my father. He became the head of the family, the whole village ostracized my grandmother. Then, they could do it more openly because my grandfather was no longer there, she didn't have a man. She had a lot of men bother her. My father used to say he knew that she was raped. But the women didn't call it that, and the community didn't call it that. She then became-- had a bad reputation as a "loose woman" because the men were like, on her all the time, and it was very difficult time for my father. He was affected a lot by that. He then became the caretaker of the family and to get her out of there, she had several brothers that were still in Texas. So in Texas, her brothers made a marriage arrangement for her and they brought the man to Mexico and he came and got her and they married her off in Texas. And that's how my father left Michoacán and came to Texas with his siblings, and she married this Texan Mexican. He was a farmworker in the United States, and their family began the migrant circuit. My father, at the age of ten, then became a farmworker working as an adult male with this stepfather of his whom he always hated. And they worked-- he worked the whole family, they traveled all over the United States working in the fields. It was a really difficult time for my father until the age of fifteen, I believe. Fourteen or fifteen, my aunts tell me, my father left the family. He refused to work with his stepfather anymore. And he left the family and worked on his own with other young men who had similar circumstances. He traveled and did the migrant circuit but with another group. I mean, in those years they traveled in groups, right? Families, caravans, he traveled with another group. But he traveled and made money so that he could live his own life away from his stepfather, who apparently was really cruel to him. Then he helped support the families. So he would in a subversive way, I guess, he would send money to his mother and to his sisters to make sure that they had what they needed, because the stepfather was not-- he kept the money. He spent it for the family, but the family was all women, right? It was his sisters and his mother. So he took care

² Hacendados are owners of haciendas, or large landed estates in Latin America.

of them, and continued working in that way until he met my mother. I believe Mom was like 21 or 22 years old when she and Dad got married, and she's a couple of years older than him so he must have been around twenty-seven or so when they got married. He knew my mother since she was, I guess, to hear her story-- She first met my father when he was fourteen, although he never knew, because he didn't pay attention to my mother. But then he met her again when she was in her twenties, when she was eighteen or nineteen or something, and they fell in love and they ended up getting married. And that was in Coahuila. So my mother grew up in Coahuila, which is a, you know, another state on the other side of Mexico. And she grew up basically an orphan. She was abandoned by her family when she was-- where her father-- her mother died when she was four, and her father abandoned her and her siblings. And they-- she lived in the streets in Rosita-- Yeah, yeah, it was a coal mining area. She lived in the streets until she was eleven years old, taking care of her brothers and sisters. And then an aunt took her in, which also traumatized my mother a lot other than the fact that she was already homeless, you know, because she was forced to abandon her brothers and sisters. So it's very similar stories of her and dad, right, where he was forced to abandon his family in order to take care of them. And my mother was forced to abandon her brothers and sisters that she'd cared for all this time. So they had like this very simple-- (cries) I always get emotional.

DAVID 00:07:46

Nueva Rosita [Coahuila, Mexico]?

ROSALINDA 00:08:35

Well, I think for us, (pauses) it's like we've grown up with them and we've seen the effects of that kind of orphan childhood, you know, because my mom has been working as an adult since she was what? Four, right. Since she was abandoned, and her father was in and out of her life. I met him, actually met her father one time when I was like, five years old. I remember him, he was a very-- he was a white man, very light skinned. I think he was Basque, although my mother won't say so. Now that I see Basque people, he really looked Basque. He had green eyes, light skin. My mother was dark, but she's got two sisters who are very light skinned and have green eyes similar to him almost blonde hair. But my mother's mother, my grandmother, was really indigenous. I have-- We have a photo of her, and she looks like she's Kickapoo or Apache or something like that. She's very, very dark, straight haired, very indigenous woman. And then she's sitting next to-- she's got my mother on her lap because she's the oldest, and my grandfather sitting standing next to him, and she's sitting, and he's like this Spaniard-looking type of man. It's just a different couple. So, and again, you know, the same thing happened to my mother. She and my dad wanted to get married, and when they got married, her whole family disowned her, because she married a gringo cuz he was from Texas. (laughs) So it was just like the same thing. It was really difficult for both of them to make their life together, but they did. They bought a piece of land in Coahuila, and they tried the migrant circuit. My dad continued working in the fields in the migrant circuit while married to Mom, but he wanted her to go with him, and she didn't. But she did one time, and she went in-- She went with him in the migrant circuit that goes up into Minnesota and Wisconsin. It was a disaster. It was a disaster. But she did live with him in Texas several times when he was working in the railroad. There was a couple of years, and that's where I was born and Elida was born. He was working in the railroads in Texas.

DAVID 00:11:04

Why did he buy a piece of land and Coahuila, a piece of land just to live on or to farm or what kind of land?

ROSALINDA 00:11:13

It was a land to live on. He bought it for my mother, because after the disastrous migrant circuit where she went with him, she absolutely said, "There is no way I am going to go back to that country again. I will not go with you."

DAVID 00:11:27

Why was it disastrous?

ROSALINDA 00:11:27

They worked picking apples and cherries, something some tree for I think it was cherries in Wisconsin, and I have the names of the towns that she told me. They made good money, and they had a car so they drove-- with that money that they made, they bought a car. They had driven up with families, but they ended up making enough money to buy their own car and so, plus a little bit of extra and then we're headed back to Coahuila, you know, where mom wanted to go back and visit her family in Texas and you know the border, they were heading back to the border. And they had all their money in the car and all their stuff. And before they left, I think it was Wisconsin. They stopped at a gas station and in a rural area. And I don't know what happened. But dad still doesn't know what happened. But their car exploded. The car burst into flames. And Elida was an infant then. He ran into the car. I was on my mother's arms. And Elida was in the car. He ran, grabbed Elida out of the car, and the car exploded. And they lost everything. They lost everything. They were left in this town with nothing except their two babies. And because of the time that it was, it was around 1953 maybe '52. They were scared because of the racism and farmworkers everywhere-- Dad always talked about that, no matter where they went, they encountered the racism, the attacks, they had to hide when there was there was large groups of white men, they would all hide to make sure they didn't see them because, you know, there was beatings and things could happen, right. I mean, he talked about hangings, lynchings of Mexicans, so they were really scared. And they looked at the gas station and the guy in the gas station, of course, came out running. And he came out running to them and Mom and Dad didn't know what to do, how they were going to protect-- Dad was looking how am I going to protect my family now from this guy, and but the guy wanted to help them and so he took them inside, and he got on the phone and Dad thought he was gonna call the police and he told mom, "Let's get out of here, he's calling the police. We don't want to be with the police." But he didn't he called other people in town. And they came and they helped. I mean, and they put Mom and Dad up. They fed them. You know, they gave them money. They gave them clothes. And they gave them money for Mom and Dad to get a bus and get back to the border. And it was amazing. Dad said he'd never encountered white people that were so nice to them, and he always told us that story, or at least me. I don't know if my brothers and sisters remember. It was his story to try to guard us from-- about racism, that it exists. It's bad. It's almost all over the place. But you know, every once in a while you find these white people who are not that way. And you have to learn how to get along with them, because it's not 100%. And you have to understand that what racism does to people, but you have to have friends that are white, because there are good people. And this is-- that was his story to show. He didn't think it was going to turn out good, but it did. Well, kind of good. So after that, Mom said, "No more. I'm not going back. It's too risky. We've got our daughters with us." He saw the life on the road with the labor camps and no living conditions, you know, no living spaces. And so they gathered enough money together. I don't know how, I'll have to ask Mom where they got the money. But they bought a little piece of land in Coahuila for mom to

stay and live on while he was working in the fields in the United States. And so she ended up farming that little piece of land. It was like an ejido, now that I know about that, because she planted corn, beans, cabbage, lots of other vegetables one time, even watermelons. I remember even eating watermelons. She became quite the gardener and the grower, you know, to keep us fed. We had chickens, dogs, you know, it was a really, I think a really cool way for us to grow up. It was her own little place and it was situated between two creeks. So she had access to water. And it was a really good you know, it was a really good spot to grow up on. It had a well, Dad dug a well. They built the house together. I remember them building the house because I was-- I can't believe I remember it, but I do. I remember the smells and the sounds of them working. The bricks being piled and the cement, Dad letting me you know, throw the cement around and stuff on the bricks. They built it. Dad built a fireplace into it, which is like, (laughs) that's not something you do in Mexico, but he built this beautiful, big old fireplace, kind of like pioneer style, you know, it was like big and domed, I could walk into it. And it had a big-- Yeah, it was for cooking. And mom cooked on it a lot.

DAVID 00:16:31

How long did you live there?

ROSALINDA 00:16:32

Until I left, until I was ten years old. Yeah. Till the whole family left. Yeah. Till we all left. Dad always said we were going to leave apparently, you know, he always told Mom that as soon as he found a place for us to live in the United States, we were going to go to the United States. And I mean, that place was like, our place with Mom. Dad was hardly ever there. The only connection we had to Dad was the money orders that arrived every week. Right? Other than that, he would show up, you know, around Christmas time or winter with gifts. And every time it came, it was like a big holiday and then he would leave. And then that was fine. We were like, Mom was there and she was great. I mean, she was a very easy going mom, she grew up as an orphan, you know, with nothing. And so, and also being treated really bad by people around her and her family and very strict Catholic upbringing with her aunt that adopted her. So she doesn't believe in religiosity, or even going to church, she had very little structure for us. We pretty much could do whatever we wanted to as long as we didn't kill ourselves. And we helped her in the garden. It was great. But then one day, as children all we remember is Dad showed up. There was long conversations into the night between the two of them, and then two days later, we're all being packed into a car that somebody brought. And we drove away. And that was it. First we went to Idaho where dad and mom worked in the potatoes. And then from Idaho, we went to La Conner [Washington] into the labor camp at [?Hulbert?] farms. And there we were in Skagit County [Washington] at [?Hulbert?] farms in La Conner at this labor camp, and we showed up in March, I believe, which was horrible because it was raining and wet. And so I was ten years old. And that summer, I was in the fields picking strawberries, you know, just like my dad, and from then on, I'm the oldest of eight. So everybody, you know, every one of us was in the fields at ten working, perhaps not as hard as some of the other farmworker families because we live there year-round, and Dad didn't believe we should work that hard, but we had to work because there was so many of us and--

DAVID 00:18:54

So you'd work like after school and on weekends?

ROSALINDA 00:18:56

After school sometimes not, depending what was going on at school, we didn't have to but me and Elida and Angelica, the oldest, did work weekends in the spring. And sometimes in the fall, if there was work, we would work on the weekends. As the other kids grew, they didn't work as much as we did. But yeah, and then in the summers of course, we started working the minute school was out, we worked all summer long. That's how we bought our school clothes and, you know, coats and things like that.

DAVID 00:19:28

So you lived in the labor camp for a while and then you got your own place?

ROSALINDA 00:19:32

Well, Mom and Dad were saving the whole time they were in the labor camp to buy a house in town in La Conner. And so I believe in 1967 or '68 they bought a house in town, but we'd lived in that labor camp even beyond that because the house needed a lot of work for us to live in it, and Dad was fixing it up a little bit at a time, the family continued living in town. I mean, we would go in and live in the house in La Conner, you know, for a couple of months in the summertime and we didn't need heating and stuff, but it was a pretty old house. In fact, now it's a registered historical building, right. (laughs) It was an old house. I mean, it needed insulation, it needed a foundation, it needed a new roof, all of that stuff. We, you know, my father and mother fixed up. It took years to do that. They continued living in camp. I think they lived in the labor camp into the late '70s. Yeah.

DAVID 00:20:29

How many years did you live there?

ROSALINDA 00:20:29

[sighs] Seventeen years. Yeah.

DAVID 00:20:33

They lived in the labor camp for seventeen years?

ROSALINDA 00:20:36

Yeah, the whole time dad worked for them. And he was fired. You know, he eventually was fired from the labor camp after about eighteen years of working there from [?Hulbert?] Farms. And so they lived in that labor camp a long time at the same time that they were working on the house. And so, you know, they owned the house, but like I said, they would go back and forth while they were repairing it. I left the labor at the age of seventeen to marry a farmworker that was, you know, had come up the migrant circuit in the labor camp. And I ran away with them. And you know that that running away was probably another epic.

DAVID 00:21:16

A family tradition?

ROSALINDA 00:21:16

Yeah, it's become a family tradition, but it's also like, it broke my father's heart, you know, because he had big plans for me. I mean, he always talked about all of us going to university, you know, doing these-- And he was like trying to figure out what are you best at, do what makes you happy. He was always about that. He was like, think about what makes you happy. And that's what you will do. That's what you should do. You should not do something that doesn't make you happy because no matter what happens, if you're doing what makes you happy and keeps you healthy, you will make money because that's just the way of nature, right. And I think his idea of money was like not vast amounts, but good living, you know, well, living well. So--

DAVID 00:22:03

I want to pause for a second and go back to what happened to you then but ask you a question about your mother and father giving up the farm in Coahuila, and becoming farm workers because this is sort of a decision other people make, but also as part of what, you know, we want to talk about later, too. Why did they do that? Why did they decide that they-- and was it that they didn't think that owning land and having a farm was important or that the money in the US was better? Or what was it that made them decide that it was better to be a worker for wages than a farmer on their own land?

ROSALINDA 00:22:56

I'm going to speak just from the anecdotes that I've heard from my mother and father, right, their stories. My father's-- and it was a conflict between them always. My mother wanted to stay on the land and farm. She believed, because after all the time she'd been there, right, she was making it. I mean, we were living off of it, and living well off of it.

DAVID 00:23:23

But you had the money that he was sending back.

ROSALINDA 00:23:27

Yeah, he was sending money back. Yeah. So-

DAVID 00:23:28

So you might not have been able to live as well if you hadn't had the money.

ROSALINDA 00:23:30

Right. That's probably true, right. But she liked that. She liked the farming. Dad-- Remember Dad, my father had been a worker all his life for white people, white growers in the United States. And so he was also an artist. And so his goal was to settle in the United States somewhere where he could work as a farmworker and paint because that's all he knew how to do, is work as a farm worker. And he liked it, he liked working as a farm worker, and he was trying to balance that out. And when he found La Conner and was offered a year-round job working as a farmworker and free housing, and in a place so close to Seattle where there was a big artistic community, and La Conner at that time in the [19]60's, was becoming this avant garde artists community. I don't know if you-- You can go back and look at it. But La Conner at that time was becoming an avant garde intellectual center. There were writers, poets and artists living there, and my father met them and became part of their circle. And so he liked that, he liked that "Oh, I can be a farm worker, I can, you know, be an artist" and I think he opted for the art rather than the farming.

DAVID 00:23:33

But you said that he liked being a farmworker. Why did he like it? What do he like about it?

ROSALINDA 00:24:30

He loved being a farmworker. I think that my father could not have been an artist or a good father if he wasn't on the land, and he was on the land. That's what made him, kept him, I think, sane and complete. He loved growing stuff, you know, growing food, growing the plants. He liked-- I mean, he talked to us about it, you know, he has journals he kept, and in those journals he writes about, "Today, you know, I set out in the fields, I was getting ready to go out and the smell of the soil was this way. The bird sounded this way, the clouds, the air, and it was like touching the soil, makes me feel happy. It makes me whole." He would write these things, you know. And he was a person of the earth. He always said "We're people of the earth. There's no getting around that we are people of the earth and we have to be in it." Right. And also, my father was a self-educated man. He never went--

DAVID 00:25:46

[inaudible] romantic too?

ROSALINDA 00:25:47

It was very romantic. And he talked to us that way. He would say, "You are children of people of the earth. You are farmworkers. Don't ever let anybody tell you or make you ashamed for being that."

DAVID 00:25:58

Let me ask you, Rosalinda, after a lifetime spent organizing farmworkers and knowing many, many, many people, do you think that your father, the way he felt was shared with a lot of other people? Or was he a unique individual in that way?

ROSALINDA 00:26:13

No, I think it was-- I think it's shared. I think even now it's shared. When I talk to farmworkers, it's shared. I think that the industrial agriculture has taken the farmworkers' voice away from identifying themselves as people of the earth, because we have been identified as machines, as beasts of burden. And I think it's convenient for people to identify as that way, because then it's easy to exploit. But if you're talking about a human being, who can express themselves as a person of the earth with this intellect and wisdom, that the growers themselves know is the right way to grow food. Right then, you know, it doesn't make it as easy to exploit. And I think a lot of the family farmers and growers know that the way they're growing food and the way they're treating the earth is wrong. And they're guilty. And so it's like creating a buffer between the reality of what farmworkers will say if you give them that opportunity. And then you're looking at that human being every day knowing that you are doing wrong. I think it's on purpose. My father did not allow that. He was very vocal about it. And he talked to other farmworkers about it, he made them feel proud of the good work that they were doing. And he made us feel proud. And he would say, you know, that this is special. This is what you do is, you know, graceful, it's a work of grace. Because what you do will make somebody else healthy and whole, you are feeding humans. And you know, nobody else is doing that except for the person growing the food or the animal or whatever. And that's a big, it's a big-- In Spanish we say don, it's like a big gift that you have to give, you know, and I was the oldest and I think that he probably, I don't know, if he spoke to my other brothers and sisters at length as much as he did to me about that. I have to say that when I was in the fields working, I liked it. Because I saw and heard what my father had told me. And he would say, "Just stand here, mija, smell, take a deep breath." You know, when the soil was plowed, "Take a deep breath." And we would, you know, and he would say, "The only time you can smell that smell." And then when you irrigate, you know, "Take a deep breath." It's another different smell, but it's the same Earth right? It's nourishing itself. Every time it's different. He would talk to me about that, and my brothers and sisters. And then you know, the smell of the plants when they grew, and the different types of plants, and you know, touching and, you know, sitting in the fields. And I've said this to many people, to family farmers, you know, who think of farmworkers as being different or you know, beasts of burden or machines. I go, "Let me let me explain something to you, and you tell me if you're different from me, you know, when we drive up to the field, you hire us to work and we sit in the field and we watch the sun come up, and the mist comes out of the soil, and the smells change, and the breezes come up, and the earth comes alive. And you feel an energy that nothing else can give you that energy, and you want to get out of the car, and you want to get to the hoeing or whatever it is you're doing and it makes you feel good. And

the beauty of the earth around you and the birds flying and the bees buzzing and all that." I said, "You know, there is nothing like it in the world. You know it, and what I want you to do is we know it, and we feel it, too. And it's wrong that you will not recognize that we are the same as you, you know."

DAVID 00:29:53

Well, but there's also-- I mean farm work is also exhausting, dangerous, people get hurt. The conditions-- if you're doing it in 105 degree heat, it's, you know, really hot. So there are a lot of aspects of the work that are not so great. How do you reconcile that with the vision that you just painted here?

ROSALINDA 00:30:17

I think that that's-- How I reconcile that is organizing, because I know that there has been a shift in how food is grown and how the work is done. And the way that we are being treated with that exhaustion takes away our ability to be able to recognize Mother Earth as its own living soul that connects with us. And so my personal reconciliation with it is organizing and trying to change it and bring in some balance to that. And I think that when I was growing up and working in the fields, I remember the exhaustion at the end of the day. I remember being so exhausted that you know, at the age of sixteen that you can even get your energy up to go to a dance, because as a teenager, right, you're exhausted, and that the only thing I could do was read. And so I would stay home and read. Yeah, not because I didn't want to go to the dance, but because I was too tired to go to the dance, your whole body's aching, and your hands are literally swollen from picking berries and they're black. You know? Who do you want to see happen to that? So I think this is where sitting in my room at the labor camp, too tired to go to a dance, or before that even, twelve and thirteen years old, too tired to do what others-- You know, like my twelve year old friends from La Conner that I was going to school with would-- It used to irritate the hell out of me, they would like (high pitched noises) in their bikes and their shorts, you know, little blonde little girls, "Rosalinda, Rosie, come on, let's go bike riding!" And I'm like exhausted. It's like, I don't want to go bike riding with you. You know, it's like how can you think of going bike riding? I just worked twelve hours. I'm tired, you know. And so I wouldn't go, and immediately I could see something's off here, right? Something's not right, with everything. And I would talk to my dad, "There's something screwy." And I would say, "There's something wrong. We're not living in the right place," I would say, you know, "Because why are we in a labor camp and everybody else is in town? It's just there's something wrong here." And so my dad told me to read, right. And that's when I started reading. I started reading about, you know, 1984 and Animal Farm and (laughs)

DAVID 00:32:51

Is that also why you oppose piece rate and that think people should be paid by the hours because of the exhaustion?

ROSALINDA 00:33:00

Yeah. The exhaustion and the pace because how can-- You have to have a pace where you're actually enjoying your work. If you're going to be a professional farmworker, you have to enjoy it. It's not just about the money. Right now, the piece rate is all about the money, farmworkers look at it as the money and I think we need to get

back to-- And these farmworkers are recent immigrants who were family farmers in Mexico, it's like, we have to capture that feeling of loving the land before it's gone into, you know, one more generation, it's gone from these people, like it's gone from us. And I think that's why if the piece rate doesn't end, then there's a whole tradition, you know, that's going to be lost. And so, I know what it's like to have to push your body to exhaustion to earn what you should be earning anyway, by the hour and enjoying the work, you know. So, I think that as a teenager, when I started reading about all of the political work going on-- I read John Steinbeck. I read John Steinbeck. I mean, when I went to Salinas [California], the first place I went to was every place John Steinbeck had been in, right. But that whole thing about owning land, right? That was a big deal about the labor camp, living in the labor camp. There's nothing there that was ours, nothing. Nothing! We were like, landless. We had nothing. In Mexico, we had had our place. The first thing that we realized when we got to the labor camp, nothing was ours. We couldn't go anywhere, do anything, touch anything. It didn't belong to us. And it was made really clear it didn't belong to us. And so that's a very dislocating feeling. You know, you're like, nowhere. That was a huge impact on me, especially, being taken away from our land in Mexico was huge. And my mother went into a deep depression. I mean, she was like, it was really difficult to handle.

DAVID 00:34:58

Well, just to play devil's advocate here for a second. Auto workers don't own the auto plant. You know, longshoremen don't own the container cranes. And even miners don't own the land that they work in as miners. And you don't hear longshoremen advocating, I mean, maybe there might be some socialist minded-- In fact, I'm sure there are a lot of socialist minded longshoremen who think that we should own everything, including the container cranes. But the-- You don't hear people feeling alienated from the worksite and from the tools of the work and from the factory that you work in, in the same way as you're describing people feeling alienated because of not owning the land that they're working on. Is there something different about working as a farmworker?

ROSALINDA 00:36:01

In my experience, being landless-- I mean, I think that farmworkers in the United States is the largest landless workforce. In the food system, I mean, in the food system, farmworkers are landless. We're not just landless in that we don't own the land we're working. We don't even know our own homes. I mean, that is the biggest issue that many of us as farmworkers have with farm labor camps. It's like farm labor camps is like a slap in the face. It's like throwing it into our face even more of how really landless we are or how little we count in every way. Because when you live in a labor camp, the people in town know that you live in a labor camp, so therefore you're something less than everybody else in the whole community, because you don't have a place. You don't own your own place. So some of these other workers own their homes, they have the opportunity to own their homes. You know, this whole thing about when you go into communities or cities, even rural towns, right, there'll be parks named after somebody. I mean, buildings named after somebody. It's like, that's ownership of your, you know, your family, your tradition, your work, the person who you are. It's a recognition that you're a human being that owns something in the community, and it's on land. And for farmworkers, we're nowhere we're not seen anywhere. I just think that we are so invisible, except for the value we bring to some landowner. Because you have to have land to produce food, you have to have land to package it, you have to own the land to put the coolers in. Some landowner is receiving the value of your work, and what you're getting is the opportunity to give him value. And that's it! That's what I found out. And I'm like, that's wrong, and I'm better than that, and you know what, my father was better than that. My father was so much better than that. And when I think about his contributions that he made, even in spite of all of these obstacles, what he could have done, given an equitable chance in the community. To this day, the museum in La Conner will not recognize

him as an artist. To this day, just I think the last fight my sister put up was trying to get him recognized at the museum in La Conner. They just, you know, courteously, you know, tell us that, "Well, it's not the time," you know, "We can't do it," or whatever. Everywhere. I mean, even in the place where we've been almost fifty years, our family has been in that town fifty years. They recognize us now as being members of that community, but they will not recognize my father as an artist. And that is the thing. That is the thing that has to happen. (cries) So, I think as farmworkers that happens over and over and over again everywhere, in every community where you go. It doesn't, you know, that the value of what we're bringing to that community is blatantly waved aside. We're invisible, and our contributions are invisible. So and I think that's part of the capitalist culture in this country, and we're the last-- it's like we are the last of the slave mentality, right? We are like the dregs of slavery in this country that they're holding onto to try to get value from the cheapest labor that they can get. And if they keep us landless, if we do not have the opportunity to root ourselves into the communities in the way that we want, then it's more easy to get more value out of us with less investment in us. It's blunt as that. So I think that land, looking at farm workers in this country owning land where we can produce is the totally dynamic change that can happen in the food system. And we all know Cesar Chavez talked about it, he talked about the, you know, owning the means of production. I mean, I think that a lot of farmworkers talk about that, in John Steinbeck's book that was what it was all about, it was all about the land that they had to leave, right, the fact that they had to work in other people's farms when they had their own farms, that you know, the change in their value of themselves to themselves and to the communities with the Great Depression and being displaced from their land is what that whole book is about. I recognize that when I read it when I was twelve years old. And I said, I mean, you can bleep this out, but I said, "Motherfuckers, this is where we're at!" I mean, this is it. And it's been happening over and over and over again. And I told my father, "Dad, this is just wrong. Living in this labor camp is wrong. Don't you see that?" And, of course, all he cared about was supporting my family, we're surviving, yes, you have to work in the fields, but it's nothing like what he had to do. When he worked in the fields. I mean, it was brutal, you know, and he didn't want us to have to work. That's why we didn't migrate. We never migrated. We stayed on that farm and we worked on that farm, and I didn't migrate until I got married at seventeen and started migrating with Danny, my husband. And then I got it. I was like, holy, it was hard, you know, moving from town to town working, finding the labor camp, walking into these dirty, stinky you know, wood cabins and trying to cook and clean and then go back to work and-- It was exhausting. And I was only seventeen, eighteen, nineteen years old, but it was just exhausting. I mean--

DAVID 00:42:13

How many years did you spend?

ROSALINDA 00:42:15

I spent that, really five years and then five additional years working in the fields in Walla Walla [Washington] and living in a labor camp in Walla Walla. So and then after that I had an opportunity to work in a bank, and you know, through affirmative action, they were forced to hire another Mexican, and I was recommended, and I ended up working in a bank, and I made that a career until I started organizing farmworkers in what? Two thousand... 1988, '89? I mean, so, and then I didn't think about it at all. I didn't think about it when I started working in the bank, and then I just focused on, again, making money, making a career, divorcing my husband, marrying another one, having another child, right. I didn't think about farmwork or farmworkers or anything until I went into the Rainbow Coalition,³ you know, then it was all about that, then it just, everything just started coming back. And I-- You know, the way that conditions were for farmworkers when I was a farmworker and

³ The National Rainbow Coalition was a political organization that grew out of Jesse Jackson's 1984 presidential campaign.

the way they are now, it's become really clear to me it's just worse. It's really worse than what it was when I was a farmworker. And that just accelerates my--

DAVID 00:43:37

[Question inaudible over car motor]

ROSALINDA 00:43:37

It's worse in the lack of respect. I mean, if my father-- If we were invisible, if we were not valued, if we were ignored, and even at times ridiculed, like I was ridiculed because I was a farmworker, I was ridiculed because I was a child of a farmworker, because you know, the looks people give. "Oh, that's Jessie's daughter." Oh okay, there's like, something different about me. I mean, you know, I know what it's like, right? It's much worse now. Now it's much more overt.

DAVID 00:44:12

You're talking about the racism?

ROSALINDA 00:44:12

The racism and disdain and the invisibility, you know. To me, that is just worse now. It's more overt, more direct, and more easier to do now. And you couple that with the lack of regulation, and when there is regulation and enforcement, the lack of it, there's just no enforcement for whatever exists, the almost like doublespeak being used these days on anything to do with farmworker policy rights. You know, it's a huge joke. I mean, we're a joke, and the growers have total control. I mean, the fact that piece rate wage rates are legal, that there's actually policy in place to dehumanize and exploit farmworkers through the piece rate process is a perfect example. It's legal, it's legal.

DAVID 00:45:16

Well I don't know to what extent it exists here in Washington, but in California, you know, there are many colonias or communities of people where people were farmworkers, who were after all, mostly farmers in Mexico are living out of doors under trees. In other words, they don't even have a labor camp, let alone an apartment or other kind of housing. People have no housing at all, and yet, are working, which is something I don't-- I think is growing, it wasn't nearly this bad thirty years ago when I was organizer for the farmworkers union. Washington state you still see people living out of doors like that.

ROSALINDA 00:45:58

Yes, there are places in Washington, but it's seasonal here. It's not-- It hasn't gotten to the point that it has in California, and I think it's easier to have that happen in California because of the weather, right. So weather here prevents, I think, that from happening. However, on a seasonal basis, there have been lots written about farmworkers having to live outdoors. I know that in the [19]50's in Washington state, many farmworkers had to live outdoors. In fact, my first husband, Danny [Torres?], always-- No, he told me the story once because he was too shaken up over it. His mother had a baby in a hospital in the Walla Walla area while they were working in a-- I believe they were cutting mint or something, they were working in a field in Eastern Washington. She had a baby, she had to come back from the hospital. They were living in a tent by the field. And they weren't making enough money, his father was alcoholic, so it was just the kids working to support the whole family. He was maybe six years old at the time. She had the infant, the baby starved to death in that tent in Walla Walla, Washington, in the mid '50's. You know, and another one, years later, she had another infant that died of the flu, because they didn't have the money. And again, they were living in a tent. So his family for many years, did the field work, you know, and they lived in tents, in these canvas tents, and they weren't very good because we didn't know how to make a tent. So I think that, you know, farmworkers being landless in the United States leaves them in a much vulnerable position. But what's interesting about the US in terms of farmworkers being landless is how easily ignored it is. I mean, it doesn't even come into the discussion on a policy level or a social level, the fact that we are not landowners have not been landowners for generations. And we can go all the way back to, you know, our land being taken from us in Texas, Arizona, New Mexico, California. I mean, it's almost like it's a legacy of that conquest, right? And we've accepted it. We don't talk about ways for us to not be landless, and what does that mean, what would that look like? I think that since I went to the social forum in Brazil and met with the leaders of the Landless Workers' Movement, we've had ongoing conversations, and we've had them visiting us, and Edgar is actually going to be going to Brazil in September, he'll be with the Landless Workers' Movement until December, for deep, you know, political education. I think we need to occupy. I think farmworkers need to take land. I think we need to start getting a taste of that, what does that look like? What does it mean to actually, you know-- Screw occupying a building like Centro de la Raza did.⁴ How about occupying farming land, agricultural land and farming it? Land that is not being used it's just sitting idle. So we're thinking about that. It's like, what would that look like? And what would be the pushback? And is the pushback worth it? I think it is, because we've tried everything. We've tried doing the right thing and earning enough money to buy land. There's all of these USDA [United States Department of Agriculture] programs, supposedly, so that farmers, Latino farmers can own land, but what you end up is maybe a few Latino farmers, they're farming the traditional, conventional way, right. And then Latino farmworkers become Latino farmers who hire Latino farmworkers who exploit the farmworkers! It's like, no, that's wrong. That's not what we want. We want to change the whole system. So what's it gonna take, you know?

DAVID 00:49:58

Well you know, you've spent now over thirty years as an organizer, essentially organizing farmworkers into unions. You know, United Farm Workers, Chateau Ste. Michelle,⁵ Sakuma Farms, Familias Unidas. In other words, fighting over the actual conditions that people are working in as well as the housing that people are living in. How does that relate to the problem of being landless that you're talking about? Because on a day to day concrete level, you're really organizing people more in terms of their existence as wage workers.

⁴ El Centro de la Raza (The Center for People of all Races) is a Latine/Chicane cultural, educational, and social service center in Seattle, Washington. El Centro was established in 1972 after activists occupied an abandoned Seattle Public Schools building and demanded for it to be repurposed as a community center.

⁵ From 1987-1995, the United Farm Workers of Washington engaged in a union drive at Chateau Ste. Michelle, a prominent winery in Washington's Yakima Valley. In a victory for farmworkers, the campaign resulted in the first binding contract between farmworkers and an agricultural employer in the state of Washington. Guillen was a leading organizer during the campaign.

ROSALINDA 00:50:38

That's right, and I think that's the big recognition. Is that if an organizer continues organizing for their entire life, and for me, really, it's only half my life. I didn't start organizing really until I was pretty much forty years old. So I'm sixty-five, that's twenty-five years, that's not very much, right. I don't think that's very long. I don't think you can say, "I'm an organizer," run a campaign, win a union contract like Chateau Ste. Michelle, and then you're done, right? Because that is just barely touching the surface. And what's clear, even with Chateau Ste. Michelle is, if you don't own the means of production in some way, you are always under attack, you always have to fight for that contract renegotiation. Every, it's like an election campaign, you have to like every two years, you have to win the votes again, you have to convince the workers again, you have to always be wary for the employer, right. So I think what I've learned is, if you're an organizer and you're organizing, you have to evolve with the political moments that keep coming at you and you have-- If you continue organizing, then you know the longer you do it, you're digging more and more into the fundamental causes of whatever the oppression is that your people are under. And if you don't address those fundamental causes, then there is no way organizing is going to change anything. And to me, that is the crux of the matter, is like, just what are we doing as organizers? Are we enabling systems to continue the way they are? And I think that's really the question, right. If I'm going to be a lifetime organizer, what fundamental change has been made? It's not satisfactory to just say, we got X number of union contracts, because you know what, those workers are still in a fight. And they're still fighting every day for their existence. It's a little bit less of a fight, maybe it's easier, maybe you know, their children are moving away from the fields and what their children are learning is we don't want to be people of the land anymore. And I don't think that should be our goal. Our goal should be to be proud of a tradition that can grow but with dignity, right. And so I think that that's the next step. It's like, as an organizer, I can't see continuing to do the type of organizing we're doing if we're not going to have a fundamental change, and there can be no fundamental change if we are not taking the land to show what the possibilities are, because we're not being given a chance to show it otherwise, we're not. We either have to fit into the mold, if we want to have land, then it's got to be the way they want us to have it. You know, these huge mortgages, interest rates, lots of money in order to do it. And they know, that's not possible. We can't sustain that, farmworkers can't sustain that, they're poor people. And that's like, it's another slap on the face. Like, "It's not our fault, it's your fault. You just can't seem to get it together to do it." I think that's wrong. So yeah, so I mean, that's what we're talking about. How do we take land?

DAVID 00:53:57

So Rosalinda--You talked about farmworkers, having to become the owners of the land or the owners of the means of production as workers. What does that mean?

ROSALINDA 00:54:11

(pauses) I'm specifically talking about land ownership. When I talk about production, it's about owning your work and your time. So, for us-- or for me-- and the thinking we've been doing with a lot of organizers across the country, it's talking about developing those alternatives that will change the system, but we know we can't develop those alternatives in small numbers, it's got to be a lot. So one of the things we've learned from the Landless People's [sic, Workers'] Movement is the way they are owning their means of production by developing worker-owned cooperatives. So they're trying to develop worker-owned cooperatives for everything that they need: services, materials, products, you know, that they use to make them themselves and

worker-owned cooperative models. Then they're also the consumers, but then also to sell outside of their solidarity economy circle, if you will. So they're looking for ways to develop that solidarity economy, and I think that they've done a really good job developing a pretty well-sustained large model in Brazil through those efforts. So what we're looking at is how do we do that? How do we increase the possibilities for farmworkers to be able to own their means of production, and what does it take to get to that point? What we've noticed is first thing that we have to do is, is to take away, to remove the fear. To take away the fear that exists in the farmworker community if they do something other than what they're doing, which is working in their fields as hired workers for farmers. That's where the organizing comes in and the fundamental education, or "formación" as we call it, in the consciousness to look at other options. I think that what I'm finding out in talking to farmworkers is, they actually have the alternatives in their heads, they have knowledge of ways to create those alternatives and different options. They're just afraid to try it, and they have not been given the opportunity and the resources to try some of these options. So that's one of the things that we're looking at, how do we create the kinds of spaces where farmworkers can begin to develop these alternatives as worker-owners of whatever enterprise they want to take on? The other one is that we've tried, and we're looking at different options for, land ownership. So we've talked to some folks about land ownership through building in communities, community land trusts. Like what does it take to build a farmworker endowed, if you will, community land trust? Where we can buy 500 acres, for example, and it's a community land trust that is there for food production and homes and facilities for farmworkers to be able to own their own work on that land? How do you govern something like that? How do you set it up? Again, that's through existing structures or developing new structures. By that I mean governmental structures, whether it be new zoning rules, new laws, whatever legislative changes need to happen. Then there's also just the plain: Just-- If there's land, and there's a group of bold workers that says we want to farm this land just to take it just to take it and occupy it, and farm it, and then go that route and see what happens. I think that what we're learning from the Landless Workers' Movement is, of course, that's how they started in Brazil, because they started that process during a dictatorship in Brazil and things were so bad, but when I look for them. But when I look at the conditions they were in the conditions we're in, in the United States, it's really not much different. It's not much different at all. In fact, I think it's even more doable, because we're not talking the kinds of millions of people that were in Brazil, but I think we're talking about a manageable number of farmworkers in the United States, even though it's maybe two and a half to three million max. So how do you do that type of education? I think for me, the saddest thing is that there isn't enough unity among what few farmworker leaders there are across the country. And, you know, the farmworker leaders in the United States, the way I see it at this point, is the old guard. We're older, we've come from another generation, we have our own ideas, we each come from a different organizing model that has certain demands that they've learned from that organizing model. Some of the older farmworker leaders are actually very comfortable with what they're doing. They have been validated, I think, by a lot of people that what they did was the right thing, I'm not saying it's the wrong thing. What I'm saying is, is it enough? Is it going in the right direction? Is it time to change our tactics and our strategies? I don't see them doing that, other than changing tactics and strategies, what they call changing-- Some of some of the farmworker leaders changing tactics and strategies is actually conforming to some of what the corporate food regime wants us to do, for example, recruit workers in Mexico and bring him up here as H2A [temporary agricultural] workers. That alleviates the pain and the suffering of the farmworkers here because they don't have to run and hide from Border Patrol and all of that, right? Instead of thinking that there are already those 3 million farm workers in the United States are undocumented, and they're already here, and they're already ready to get to work and that it's not their fault or anybody else's fault, that they're not doing the work. It's the system that's keeping them that. So why capitulate to the system and begin to fit into it in order to end pain and suffering because we don't want to just end pain and suffering; we want to change the system and stop it. We don't want to create a whole 'nother system that will lead to more pain and suffering down the future. So I think we need bold tactics. Some of it could be occupying land and testing that and see what happens. Are people gonna pay attention that we are a landless workforce that deserves better than

what we have and that it wasn't anyone's fault that NAFTA [North American Free Trade Agreement]⁶ passed and his land was taken away, and he was displaced so he can no longer farm his own land in Oaxaca, so now he's here and, by God, now he sees a piece of land, he's gonna take it? I think we have to call attention to some of the fundamental causes of farmworker suffering in this country and exploitation.

DAVID 01:01:19

Well, out of those, say, two and a half million farm workers in the United States, a third, probably almost half of them work in California, and land in California is monopolized. California agriculture is based on huge tracts of land that belong to private owners. So the first thing is that unless you're able to find some different land to occupy, you're talking about the land that already belongs to somebody else. Even if you pulled those workers out of that system, and you found some other land, those growers would simply, as you say yourself, those growers would simply start an H2A program or find some other farmworkers somewhere else. There would be again with another, you know, 750,000, million, farmworkers in California, in the same conditions. So how do you see this change taking place?

ROSALINDA 01:02:23

I see this change being a process. It's a process of challenging the status quo. There can be no development of solutions or answers with clarity that consumers will understand, and that family farmers in the United States will understand, without those solutions actually being manifested in some way. Maybe the first manifestation is not going to be a manifestation of a solution but a drastic manifestation of the exploitation that's occurring, and a demand for people to listen and to hear. It's calling out these large corporate agriculture about what they have done, not just to farmworkers but to the rest of the communities around them. Because it isn't just farmworkers that are suffering from this corporate takeover of the food system. It's everything around wherever they're at. I mean, they taint everything. Wherever they are growing these mono-agricultural systems that are where food is grown with toxic chemicals and in slave labor. So I think it's going to have to be a very public manifested challenge. And like anything else, it will depend on the support that we get from consumers and other people of good conscience and how strong that support is going to be, and we have to we have to take a chance. I've learned from the farmworkers themselves all across the years, I think of in the past years. The strawberry campaign is one good example of how if the union had done what the farmworkers wanted, we could have won. But, you know, the majority of the leaders hold back, we as leaders sometimes hold back because we think we know more, or we know the system more, or we know the danger that's coming, therefore we have the right to hold back

DAVID 01:04:22

What did workers want to do that they were being held back from?

ROSALINDA 01:04:25

⁶ NAFTA resulted in increased poverty among small farmers in southern Mexico who produced for the local market, as they were forced to compete with the lower prices of imported corn and other agricultural products.

They just wanted to keep organizing, to keep going, to keep the campaign going, to keep having elections, whether winning or losing, you keep doing it, you just do it over and over again, you challenge the agricultural industry consistently. We did not do that. We didn't sustain it. There was nothing to say that we could have or couldn't have, but I feel like we didn't try, and I think that if the farmworkers are willing to lead that effort, we should stand by them. And that's the one thing I've learned from my years of organizing. We did that with the Chateau Ste. Michelle workers. We did it, to a certain extent, out of ignorance, just because we were with the farmworkers, and they were leading, and we were there to support them, and they had enough support. And we won because they were leading it, and it was what they wanted at the time. I think what was missing with the Chateau Ste. Michelle campaign was the broader education of the food system of the corporate exploitation. And that without that, what you got was what you got: a union contract for those less-than-200-families, and it was neatly contained to that, and it continues that, and everything around them is going to shit. Right? Farmworkers are worse off, more pesticides, more exploitation, but that contract is there. That's not good enough. So I think with Community to Community and our alliances with the US Food Sovereignty Alliance, Domestic Fair Trade Association and others, what we're doing with farmworkers now, what our organizing is about is expanding our vision of what-- of where we are as farmworkers, where we've been as farmworkers and why what happened happened. Why do we keep losing? It's not our fault. It's not because we're not good enough. It's not because we're not brave enough. It's not because we're not smart enough or strong enough. It's because the system is created so that we can't. So what we've got to do is say, "What new system do we have to develop for ourselves that we know works for us? How do we manifest that so that it grows?" Because it's like, it's like a virus or a disease if we grow it, and we get it out there to enough farmworkers, people are attracted to what's good and safe, and we'll help them live a good life. I firmly believe that if we have those options up out there, people will gravitate towards that and will fight for it. I've seen it with Familias Unidas por la Justicia. I mean, they say "hasta el fin [until the end]." They know that where they are now is bad. They know that because what's happening now is bad and because of what they believe in what they think, it's not their fault. So they will fight to fix it until the end. What is the end in their minds? Does it matter? "The end" could be a victory. Or we could lose and fail, which means death, right? Because to them a failure is not not winning a contract or, getting better housing. To them, winning is fighting with dignity. So as long as they're fighting with dignity, it's a win and they don't see a loss. I mean, they've told me that, hasta el fin, that means you're standing up with your dignity, and you keep looking for another option because in their minds, there's always something else out there. If we stand true, and we have our dignity, we will find that way. Then the only other theme is death. If they be killed, mowed down by guns or whatever, that's okay, too, because they tried doing it, right. You talked to Felimón Pineda, and it's [Emiliano] Zapata⁷ all over again for him, this is just like it was. In fact, he's actually reading the history of Zapata in taking strategic ideas from what they did. I was like, I think that there's just all sorts of things that can happen if we just take action. You can't overanalyze, overpredict, or think, or be fearful, right that if we do this, people are gonna get hurt. It's like, you know what? No matter what we do, if it's not part of the status quo, people are gonna get hurt.

DAVID 01:02:42

Two more questions. So the first one is: Do you think that the private ownership of land in big chunks by big corporations is part of the problem?

ROSALINDA 01:09:00

⁷ Emiliano Zapata was a leader in the Mexican Revolution (1910-1920) who called for the redistribution of land from haciendas (large estates) to peasants.

Yes, it is totally part of the problem, and this country no longer has a family farming system because of that. I believe that family farmers did not fight hard enough to stop the monopolization of land ownership in this country. There are groups like the Family Farm Coalition, the Family Farm Defenders, there are family farmers that are very militant and fighting to keep the land that they have and to try to protect land that is being taken away from other farmers. So farmworkers are not the only ones that understand this. There are many family farmers that I believe could and should be our partners in this fight to break up the ownership of land. I mean, they're breaking up banks. They're stopping the monopolization of other businesses in this country. I think they should do the same thing with land. I think land should be broken up. It should be given up to possibly some of the original owners. I mean, the African Americans are talking about reparations, that should be part of it: land. It should be given back to the Native Americans and restored to their traditional growing areas. I mean, we've got to restore our food system to what it needs to be. People are dying because the food we're eating is shit. It is shit. It is grown with shit. I mean, when I think about the way that sausages are made with the meat that is being used and chickens and bones, it's just disgusting. The way our our processed food is sold today. There's gotta be a big change, and who's going to lead that change? You can say whatever you want about the United Farm Workers, but it was a group of farmworkers that were fearless that went out and did a boycott in their rickety old cars and stood in front of grocery stores and said, "Don't buy those grapes because I'm the one getting exploited!" That created a big shift in people, right, in people's minds about the food that they were looking at even if it was just a grape. But still, I think we can do that again. I think workers need to say you're eating-- I mean, that's what Familias Unidas is doing Ramon [Torres, president of Familias Unidas por la Justicia] standing in front of Whole Foods and Bellingham [Washington] just this last-- what was it? Wednesday, right? Telling people, "Don't eat those strawberries, because when you eat those strawberries, you're hurting me and my people. See that family right there? They picked it. They're being exploited." People are like-- Some people were really offended, they can't take it. It's like something that has just never been exposed to them. Right? But they need to see it. They need to see the fact of the exploitation that goes into the food that they're eating. And if it's going to take us farmworkers to do it again, well, maybe that's what we need to do to wake up a lot of other family farmers and others. And he said he recognized several Whatcom County [Washington] farmers that were there. They were shocked, but they didn't oppose, they were just like totally stunned by listening to the farmworkers. Why? Because they're used to having farmworkers in their fields be submissive, quiet, doing exactly what they want. And here it was a group of farmworkers that were standing up for themselves and being very, very strong. So I think that's the only way you can change things. And it has to be changed in people's minds first, before you can go out and really do something that will change a system.

DAVID 01:12:17

What do you think the connection is between the movement for food justice and immigrant rights?

ROSALINDA 01:12:25

In our minds, it's the same. It's the same. You can't separate the two: The hunger strikes at the detention centers, the reports we get from the immigrant workers in the detention centers about literally their food is doled out to them by calorie count. And the food is this horrible processed food, no salt, no pepper, no seasoning. It's just the cheapest, easiest prepared, processed food that they can give them. They are counting their calories every day. It's bad food. It's all connected because everybody eats. Immigrant justice in the United States immigration system is fed by the displacement of landowner workers that were landowners in Mexico and South America, because of the trade agreements that started in 1994 with NAFTA, and it's just been a complete displacement of all types of workers in South America and Mexico that have moved north. Now, there's even more, and it's

getting worse. And so they're all sitting in detention centers in your local community. These undocumented workers come from these displaced places in Mexico and South America and a lot of these workers are professional farmers. They know how to grow food, they know how to grow food with no chemicals, how to conserve water, how to take care of the land, they know how to do that, still. I feel desperate that we have to find a way to change this system now and to organize these family farmers from South America now before they lose that, because their children are already losing it. So we're one generation away again, from losing that knowledge of how to grow food on land. So I think it's a big challenge. It's got to happen sooner than we think. No more of this thinking that we got a lot of time. We don't have a lot of time because we are poisoning-- the corporate food regime is poisoning the earth and the water to the levels that we may not be able to grow food on that land for a long time. In some places never. So we have to keep moving. We have to figure it out, and we have to challenge the status quo in ways that people think is not appropriate or offensive. But it is what it is. We can only take so much.

DAVID 01:14:53

When you say "changing the system" are you talking about capitalism?

ROSALINDA 01:14:57

Yes, you cannot look at producing foods simply for the profit that it's gonna make for you, and that's where we are right now. The production of food is based on how much money a farmer or corporation can make off of the food that they're growing, and farmworkers are a liability on their financial-- We are a liability on those financial statements, and there is no investment going into us because they don't believe we're worth investing in. So we're part of a financial equation in a capitalist system that is disposable and easily replaceable, or has been so far because the trade agreements and the easy-- The guest worker program is a good example. We're disposable because you can bring them in and ship them out, bring them in and ship them out, and make money off of us. It's time to end that because we're human beings, and we're part of the community, and we eat, too, like everybody else. And the fact, Cesar [Chavez] said it: The fact that we can't even afford the very food that we grow, like these carrots, these are organic carrots. I mean, I can afford them right now. But a farmworker can't pay the price for these fresh carrots that I just paid, and they grow them. So it's totally off-balance, it's unsafe, unsustainable, inhumane, and unhealthy for everybody: For people, for animals, for the earth, and we're the first ones to go. Farmworkers are the first ones to feel that unhealthy situation with the pesticides, with the broken backs and bones because of the production standards that they set on the piece rate wage process. We have to be the first ones to speak out because we're the first one to die. Everybody knows the average lifespan of a farmworker is forty-nine years, two years up from-- what was it? Year 2000. When we looked at the lifespan, I think it was forty-seven. Yay, we're up to fort-nine. I think they made a mistake in their calculations. (laughs)

DAVID 01:17:06

Has the conditions for farmworkers themselves improved as a result of organic farming? Is our organic farms better places for farmworkers to work?

ROSALINDA 01:17:17

They're better places because they're not exposed to chemicals. But that's it. That's it.

DAVID 01:17:23

What about wages, conditions, all the rest of it?

ROSALINDA 01:17:26

It varies on individual farmer. And there's very few farmers that we know of treat their workers with respect and pay decent wages. Other than that, it's the fact that they're not exposed to chemicals, that's it. But there's no job security, there's no benefits. There's maybe a little bit more respect because a worker has to have-- doesn't have to have-- The worker can use the skills he already knew about how to grow food without chemicals, right. There are many smaller to mid-sized organic farms that actually have improved their production because they've let the farmworkers use their skills, but they're not recognizing the workers for those skills or paying them more for those skills. It's just the workers actually get a little bit more pleasure because they get to maybe farm a little bit more than they would in a production, you know, corporate-- What do you call it? Industrial production farm. So it's the vast majority of organic farms do not treat workers any different than conventional farms. They're just not exposed to chemicals.

DAVID 01:18:30

Well, some of the organic-- some organic agriculture is done by the same big growers that did traditional style, industrial style agriculture before and just see that there's money to be made and growing organic produce of Safeway.

ROSALINDA 01:18:48

Driscoll's does that. They have organic agriculture, it's just industrial organic. The only difference is the worker's not exposed to chemicals. That's it. Otherwise, it's bad. I don't think worker safety is any better because the production standards are still there. There's no relief, there's no benefits. There's no medical care, nothing if a farmworker injures themselves to try to earn a little bit more than minimum wage by pushing his body faster. So yeah, no, it's not any better.

DAVID 01:19:29

Anything else that you want to talk about?

ROSALINDA 01:19:32

Oh no, except that I'm running out of time. I mean, can we get to where I believe we need to get to in ten years or less? Because I'm 65, and, you know, do I have enough organizers ready to take on the tough work that I know I can't because of my age? Yeah, it's tough. I just---yeah. Some people think I'm crazy because of what I think. That's all right. (laughs)

DAVID 01:20:10

Okay.